
What would ethnography look like if it were written for young Africans instead of Western academic professionals? It would probably describe practices and meanings, define and apply analytical terms, and provide a holistic survey of how cultural commitments ‘make sense’ contextually. Celia Nyamweru’s book encourages young Kenyans to appreciate the cultural history and current practices of the Akamba people, an ethnic group living primarily in central Kenya. This review summarizes this survey of Akamba ‘tradition’, evaluates how well the book achieves its goals, and suggests how scholars can follow Nyamweru’s example.

The book’s Forward and introductory chapter clearly address its Akamba audience. The Forward prepares readers to encounter bolded keywords, terms in the Kįkamba language, and extracts from colonial-era accounts. The Introduction is an Akamba-oriented Anthropology 101 class. It approaches culture as a set of knowledge, skills, social structures, beliefs, and rituals (in that order), and quickly moves on to the book’s primary concern: practices and ideas dedicated to managing ecological, social, and spiritual threats to Akamba well-being. Nyamweru discusses how terms like ‘supernatural’, ‘witchcraft’, and ‘traditional healer’ distort the indigenous point of view and concludes that it is better to use Kįkamba terms as much as possible. All of this is important, she notes, because Kenya’s Constitution promotes the culture concept and cultural heritage as the foundations of the nation. Young people therefore need to understand culture in order to be effective citizens, but much of Kenya’s cultural history is relatively inaccessible for these youth because it lies in university libraries and behind online publishers’ paywalls. Finally, Kenyan elders want the younger generation to know about ‘tradition’. Nyamweru has responded to these challenges with a book that speaks directly to Akamba secondary school students.

Chapters 2 and 3 review research methods and summarize mythological, linguistic, and oral historical accounts of Akamba history. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 address the core tradition of the Akamba—the use of kīthitū oaths, curses, vows, and protective charms to prevent or settle disputes. These intersections of ritual practice and customary law had pragmatic social effects for creating and maintaining a distinctly Akamba sort of social order. These chapters describe such aspects of kīthitū in shifting historical contexts, from precolonial practices to their uses in colonial and early postcolonial courts. Nyamweru assembles descriptions of these kīthitū, and how to manage or perform them, from both scholarly accounts and her interviews. Readers learn how materials such as animal horns, iron slag, and sheep fat could be combined into objects of power that regulate human behavior and punish violations with illness or death. And there’s the rub—the Kenyan Constitution forbids traditional dispute mechanisms that are ‘repugnant to justice and morality’. Is performing a ritual that threatens one’s family and community with death ‘repugnant’? Nyamweru answers that some kīthitū are cheap,
fast, culturally appropriate, and morally sound, and so should have a place in Kenyan law. Chapters 7, 8, 9, and 10 examine truth-finding ordeals (such as licking red-hot metal), curses and oaths made with clay pots, words, and bodily fluids, protective objects and practices (such as amulets and theft prevention rituals), and sacred sites and shrines (like the sacrificial areas beneath wild fig trees). These chapters focus on Akamba strategies for achieving justice, social consensus, and trust.

Chapter 11 concludes the book by reviewing what Akamba scholars have said about the place of tradition in twenty-first-century Kenya. The general themes here are hybridized institutions, legal and religious pluralism, and the need to harmonize ‘traditional’ cultural concepts and practices with ‘modern’ institutions. A series of appendices provide a glossary of specialized terms from Kīkamba and anthropology, a note on the spelling of Kikamba words, the list of Nyamweru’s interview questions, and an extensive bibliography.

Nyamweru’s book succeeds as a review of Akamba ritual practice, its social effects, and its relevance in present-day Kenya. What is missing is a deeper dive into the culture concept. Akamba culture appears in this text as a normative search for order. In current anthropology, culture is a contested process among unequal social actors. Victor Turner established three strategies for the symbolic analysis of ritual. This book follows Turner’s first and second levels to describe objects and practices and provide local accounts of what they mean and do. But it does not address his third level, in which the anthropologist works out how and why meanings and actions fit together in a particular way. For the Akamba, this interpretive level would include the symbolic logic of fertility, gender, and kinship, and the cultural meaning of fixing relationships in place and closing flows of resources. When a protective kūlūma charm sticks a thief’s hand to a stolen cell phone (p. 143), for example, understanding this requires an analysis of ‘sticking’. This sort of interpretive analysis could get theoretical enough to frustrate secondary school students, so it would be useful if the book pointed curious readers toward new ways to understand the material. I think a teacher’s guide would be a good supplement for this book to make some of these connections, particularly for readers from other parts of East Africa.

The writing is clear and engaging. The text has some unusual features: the people consulted appear parenthetically by interview numbers instead of pseudonyms and Akamba cultural expert Professor David Maillu repeatedly appears in text boxes to offer critical commentary on points being made in the main text. Nyamweru is an expert on Kenyan sacred sites (especially the coastal kaya forests of the Mijikenda peoples), but she does not build comparisons with the Akamba material using this work.

Nyamweru’s book challenges scholars of culture, society, history, and religion. How can we write ‘for’ the people we know so well instead of ‘about’ them? How can we expand our educational mission to students in far-off rural schools? How can we ‘decolonize our minds’ about what counts as scholarly publication? Should there be a parallel book about culture, history, and tradition for each ethnic group in Kenya, and for each group in Africa? Answering these questions requires a ‘people’s scholarship’ for a popular African readership, and this book is a first step toward the justice and inclusivity of that goal.

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